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Brian Michael Jenkins

July 1983

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SOME REFLECTIONS ON RECENT TRENDS IN TERRORISM

Brian Michael Jenkins

July 1983

PREFACE

The following reviews recent trends in terrorism and discusses possible future developments. Different versions of this paper, or portions of it, have been used in a number of recent discussions with government officials and in several public addresses. An abbreviated version was published in *Newsday*, July 17, 1983.

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SOME REFLECTIONS ON RECENT TRENDS IN TERRORISM

The bombing of the American embassy in Beirut in which 57 people were killed like the bombing of the French embassy a year earlier in which 14 people died, represent both the success and the dilemma of those charged with security against terrorists. In the 1970s, seizing embassies and kidnapping diplomats were common terrorist tactics. With better security and growing resistance to meeting terrorist demands, embassy takeovers declined but assassinations and bombings increased. Overall, attacks on diplomats went up.

The dilemma is that terrorists can attack anything while governments cannot protect every conceivable target against every possible kind of attack. If embassies cannot be seized, embassies can be blown up. And if terrorists cannot blow up embassies they can blow up railroad stations, hotel lobbies, restaurants, or Horse Guard parades. The dilemma of security officials is part of a larger problem confronting those who must deal with terrorism.

Despite increasing government success in combating terrorists, the total volume of terrorist activity worldwide has increased during the last ten years. It is a paradox that frustrates governments and confounds analysts.

Governments have become tougher in dealing with terrorists. More and more governments have adopted hard-line, no concessions, no negotiations policies--a marked change from the situation in the early 1970s when governments often gave in to the demands of terrorists holding hostages. Terrorists who seize embassies, a popular tactic in the 1970s, now face arrest and prosecution.

They also risk being killed as more and more governments have demonstrated their willingness to use force whenever possible to end hostage episodes at home and abroad. When Arab separatists seized the Iranian embassy in London in April 1980, the British government refused to meet any of their demands and later sent in SAS commandos to rescue the hostages. All but one of the terrorists were killed in the assault. Terrorists who seek worldwide publicity and political concessions by

barricading themselves with hostages now must also contemplate being shot.

Governments sometimes still make secret deals with international terrorist groups, offering freedom of movement in return for immunity from attack; but with some exceptions, governments appear less inclined to "parole" imprisoned foreign terrorists simply to avoid further attacks.

At the technical level, governments have become more proficient in combating terrorism. They have skillfully used offers of reduced sentences, conditional pardons, new identities to key witnesses and other inducements to persuade at least some terrorists to provide information about their organizations. Italy has been particularly successful in exploiting the so-called "repentants," as they call apprehended terrorists who have taken advantage of a new law providing reduced sentences in return for information. The willingness of captured Red Brigades members to talk was one of the key factors in the rescue of General Dozier in 1982. The collection and analysis of intelligence have improved. International cooperation has increased.

Physical security around likely terrorist targets also has greatly increased. It is harder now, though still possible, to smuggle weapons aboard airliners. Embassies have become fortresses. Diplomats and top executives often travel in armored limousines with armed bodyguards. Specialized tactics and skills have been developed for use in hostage situations.

Worldwide, thousands of terrorists have been arrested or compelled to go deeper underground. Some groups have been virtually destroyed. Others are hard-pressed by authorities.

Most of the Red Brigades now reside in prison. German police captured the operational heads of the Red Army Faction in December of last year. Eleven members of the FALN, a Puerto Rican separatist group, were apprehended in Illinois three years ago. One of the most wanted Puerto Rican separatist bombers was recently captured in Mexico.

But despite these undeniable achievements, the total volume of terrorist activity in the world has not diminished. Like the Hydra--the mythical many-headed monster that grew two heads each time one was severed, terrorism persists, even grows, despite defeats. Authorities

are able to suppress terrorists at least temporarily, but thus far have been unable to reduce terrorism at least not easily, without resorting to unacceptable methods of repression.

Old groups survive. New groups appear. They are generally smaller, more tightly organized at the operational level and harder to penetrate, sometimes less structured at the national level and harder to predict, always more violent.

Exact figures vary according to the source of information, collection criteria and procedures, but the trajectory of terrorism continues upward. While in some countries terrorist activity has declined, it has increased in others. Terrorism declined sharply in Italy last year but exploded in France. The number of terrorist incidents in Israel dropped sharply after Israel's invasion of Lebanon, but the number of terrorist attacks on Israeli and Jewish targets abroad went up.

Governments may be able--and more willing--to pursue local terrorists than those who cross borders to carry out their attacks or who attack targets connected to foreign governments. Counting local and international terrorism together, we see a slight decline in the total number of incidents since 1980 but a 13 percent annual increase in the number of deaths caused by terrorists. Looking at international terrorism by itself, the picture is worse. The first three years of the eighties have showed an annual increase in international terrorism of approximately 30 percent--twice the rate of increase in the 1970s. Overall, terrorist activity has increased four-fold in the decade since the Munich incident.

This is not to say that terrorism has been a success. Nowhere, this side of the colonial era, have terrorists yet achieved their own stated long range-goals. No doubt terrorism did contribute to the success of colonial insurgents a generation ago. Certainly terrorist tactics figured prominently in the struggles for independence in Israel, Cyprus, Algeria, and Kenya, and after lengthy and debilitating military contests like those in Indonesia, Indochina and Algeria, colonial governments appeared almost eager to abandon distant possessions which had become costly anyway. Flags came down at the first whiff of cordite. But the stakes are higher at home. Governments are not so

willing to separate what is regarded as national territory--Northern Ireland, the Basque Provinces, Brittany or Corsica--even if it means a fight. Nor will they yield before the onslaught of ideologically-motivated terrorists on the left or right.

Terrorists are able to attract publicity to themselves and their causes. They cause worldwide alarm. They create crises that governments are compelled to deal with. They make governments and corporations divert vast resources to security measures. Occasionally they win concessions. In several instances they have provoked the overthrow of governments, usually by elements willing to use repressive tactics with less constraint. Some terrorists see this last achievement as an intermediate objective in their struggle to seize power; repression is supposed to arouse the masses to join the resistance. Historically, however, such Pyrrhic victories have been preludes to the terrorists' own destruction. In Uruguay, Argentina and Turkey, rising levels of terrorist violence provoked military takeovers that led to harsh crackdowns, which local terrorists did not survive.

Terrorists have been unable to translate the consequences of terrorism into concrete political gains. Nor have they yet revealed a convincingly workable strategy that relates terrorist violence to positive political power. In that sense terrorism has failed. It is a fundamental failure, ironically one recognized by early Marxist revolutionaries.

The paradox works on both sides. Despite their failure, terrorists persist in their struggles. Why? Are terrorists irrational or simply slow learners? Probably neither, but they are capable of self delusion. Professor Franco Ferracuti, a noted psychiatrist who has studied Italy's terrorists, suggests that terrorists wage fantasy wars. The presumption of war permits violence that would otherwise be unacceptable. It is, however, fantasy because the rest of society does not share the presumption.

In fact, cut off from most normal contacts with society, having only each other to talk to, terrorists live in a fantasy world. Their organizations are extravagant assertions. They imagine themselves to be armies and brigades. They believe themselves to have legions of supporters or potential supporters on whose behalf they claim to fight,

but their constituencies, like their military formations, are largely imaginary.

Terrorists carry out operations they believe are likely to win widespread approval from these perceived constituents. But they do not always seem able to distinguish between a climate that is favorable to them because of what they do and a climate that just happens to be favorable to them. Terrorists, like the Weather Underground Organization, who were active during the height of the protests against the Vietnam War mistook anti-war sentiments for pro-revolutionary sentiments.

Terrorists fall prey to their own propaganda. They overestimate their own strength, their appeal, the weakness of their enemies, the imminence of victory. And they continue to fight, for to quit is not simply to admit defeat. It requires an admission of irrelevancy. It removes the justification for violence.

Some terrorists may be less concerned with progress toward distant goals, or the lack of it. It's not winning or losing, it's playing the game. They are action-oriented rather than goal-oriented. Terrorism becomes an end in itself, for some because living a dangerous life underground, oiling weapons, building bombs, endlessly planning and occasionally carrying out acts of violence fulfill some inner psychological need; for others perhaps because membership in a terrorist organization gives them status and offers them opportunities for the continued application of criminal skills which they have developed as terrorists.

This suggests another reason why terrorist groups go on. Terrorist groups are collections of persons with otherwise unsalable skills. They have membership, hierarchy, management, specialized functions, a cash flow. Organizations are dedicated to survival. They do not voluntarily go out of business. Right now the immediate objective of many of the world's hard-pressed terrorist groups is the same as the immediate objective of many of the world's hard-pressed corporations, that is, to continue operations.

They may restructure themselves to do so. They may revise their goals. They may alter their operations. But they will struggle to stay in business. It is an organizational imperative.

In the process of long-term survival, some terrorist groups are changing their character. It costs a great deal of money to maintain a terrorist group. Terrorists who do not receive financial support from foreign patrons must earn it through bank robberies, ransom kidnappings, extortion, smuggling, participation in the narcotics traffic, all of which require criminal skills. Gradually, the criminal activities in support of terrorism become ends in themselves as terrorist groups come to resemble ordinary criminal organizations with a thin political veneer.

If the world's major terrorist groups sank into common criminality, the problem of terrorism might diminish, but the lack of progress and the methods necessary to achieve it remain issues within the terrorist ranks. As in war when neither side prevails, there is a tendency toward escalation, and we see evidence of escalation in terrorism. At the beginning of the 1970s, 80 percent of terrorist operations were directed against things, 20 percent against people. By the 1980s, approximately half of all terrorist attacks were directed against people. Incidents with fatalities have increased by roughly 20 percent a year. Large-scale indiscriminate attacks like the bombing of the American embassy in Beirut have become more common. In 1982, six terrorist bombings alone killed over 80 persons and injured more than 400. 1983 is likely to be the year of the car bomb; 5 car bombs this year have already killed 135 and injured nearly 600 persons. Civilian bystanders--those who just happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time--are increasingly victims of terrorist operations, further evidence of growing indiscriminate violence.

There are several explanations why terrorism has grown bloodier. Terrorists have been brutalized by long struggles, the public numbed. Staying in the headlines in a world in which incidents of terrorism have become increasingly common and recovering the coercive power terrorists once exercised over governments who have since become more resistant, require acts of greater violence. Terrorists also have become more proficient; they can now build bigger bombs. At the same time, the composition of terrorist groups has changed as harder men have replaced the older generations of terrorists who debated the morality and utility of actions against selected individuals.

Just how far terrorists will escalate remains a matter of debate within the inner circles of terrorist leaders and conjecture by outside observers. We could see more of more of the same, no great change in tactics or targets, the continued ragged increase of terrorism as we know it today. Or we could see escalation in the form of increasing events of large scale violence. At the far edge of plausibility are the scenarios that fascinate newspapers and novelists in which terrorists acquire and use or threaten to use chemical or nuclear weapons to hold cities hostage. Almost every terrorist group probably has contemplated the utility of violence on a larger scale. And, for the most part, they have rejected it. Unless we are talking about high technology terrorism, the constraints on terrorists are not technical but rather are self-imposed and political.

If recent bombings in London, Paris, Beirut, and Pretoria are any indication, these constraints seem to be eroding. In hideouts of the Red Brigades, Italian police last year discovered a frightening terrorist plan to attack the Christian Democrats political convention--an operation that if realized would have resulted in the deaths of dozens of people. Smarting from their defeat and withdrawal from Beirut, PLO chief Yasir Arafat reportedly is under pressure from hardliners to abandon his current "moderate" course and permit the creation of a new Black September organization to wage a worldwide campaign of terrorism. The recent car bombing in Pretoria represents a new and likely to be bloodier phase in the struggle of African National Congress guerrillas against white rule in South Africa.

Occasionally intelligence sources, terrorist publications, or the testimony of defectors give us a glimmer of the arguments for and against such operations. The more moderate among the extremists argue that apart from being immoral, indiscriminate violence is counterproductive. It alienates perceived constituents (even if they are largely imaginary), causes public revulsion, provokes extreme countermeasures that the organization might not survive, and exposes the operation and the organization itself to betrayal by terrorists who have no stomach for slaughter. Harder men and women counter that wars (even fantasy wars) are won by the ruthless application of violence. Gradually the hardliners prevail.

It is difficult to argue for constraint in an organization comprised of extremists who have already taken up arms, especially if things are not going well. Terrorists are by nature not easily disciplined. Terrorists with too many scruples drop out, are removed, or go along with hardliners to maintain their position of leadership.

Governments grow tougher and more efficient. Terrorists persist and grow more savage. And terrorism increases.

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